

Disability Awareness Month

WORKING WITH PLACES OF WORSHIP

A place of worship should be a place where all people, regardless of race, disability or gender, can worship. A religious community is an excellent place to increase awareness of the abilities of people with disabilities. As new members are welcomed into the congregation, it is important to include people with disabilities and seek their participation.

There are several ways to work with places of worship in your area: 1) focus on increasing disability access and awareness in your own congregation; 2) if you do not belong to one, focus on increasing awareness in one or more congregations in the community; or 3) invite other places of worship in the community to join with yours to increase disability access and awareness.

Getting Started

For a congregation to make lasting changes, a planning structure is needed. The first step is to create a disability task force. One way to give the task force stature is to have a clergy member sign a letter inviting members to participate. Then, get support from the congregational governing board, if one exists.

The task force should include you; people with disabilities; parents and relatives of people with disabilities; a religious education teacher; a youth group member; a service provider; a member of the congregation's mission/outreach committee, if one exists; an elder, deacon or other lay leader; and the church's clergy member. It might also be a good idea to recruit people skilled in policy-making, planning and leading worship, coordinating educational programs, fund raising, community outreach, and written communications.

If several congregations are involved, each should have its own disability task force. Another committee should be organized to bring together members of each task force and to plan community wide events. Then Disability Awareness Month activities can be planned within each place of worship and as a community of congregations.

The following information offers ideas you can implement in a local place of worship. Your disability task force might come up with other ideas, as well. The enclosed resource list provides information on a wide variety of books, materials, and organizations from a variety of religious traditions. You might also check with the national office of your religious denomination, if one exists, for any disability-related information or activity suggestions.

Defining Objectives

The book *Creating the Caring Congregation* by Harold H. Wilke (see resources section) lists some objectives on which the task force should focus initially:

1. Recognize the dual task: architectural and attitudinal accessibility.
2. Work with people with disabilities; listen to their feelings and concerns.
3. Work with the member of the clergy on a consciousness-raising experience to take place during a worship service.
4. Work with the religious education staff to create disability simulations for both children and adults.
5. Create simulation experiences for people within the place of worship to occur at a fair or other function.
6. Work with the worship committee to discover ways in which people with various kinds of disabilities are excluded by the current forms of worship.
7. Develop a study theme on attitudinal barriers for religious education groups of both children and adults.

Introducing Disability Awareness Month

Posters placed in high-traffic areas in your place of worship are an easy way to increase awareness of people with disabilities and disability-related issues. The Governor's Council for People with Disabilities offers posters, bookmarks, stickers, and many other collateral materials

free of charge each year for Disability Awareness Month. To order, contact Kim Dennison at (317) 631-6400 (voice), (317) 631-6499 (fax) or kdennison@bjmpr.com (e-mail).

Another effective way to increase awareness is through the congregation's newsletter. In many newsletters, the clergy member writes a column. Ask if he or she will write about people with disabilities for the March newsletter. You can also place a small article about what the place of worship will be doing during the month of March and reprint the Disability Awareness Month camera-ready artwork (enclosed in this packet).

Religious Education: Children

Check with your local religious bookstores for any educational materials they have available on the subject of disabilities. You might want to have children discuss experiences they have had with people with disabilities – a family member, a person in the neighborhood or at school, or someone at a shopping mall. It is important to explain that people with disabilities are *people first*. If a member of your congregation has a disability, ask him or her to speak to the classes. You might have the children put on a short presentation for the congregation about how to interact with people with disabilities. The Council's "Power of Words" brochure provides information about proper behavior and language to use when interacting with someone with a disability.

In *Unexpected guests at God's banquet: Welcoming people with disabilities into the church*, Brett Webb-Mitchell offers thoughts on opening religious education programs to all children, with and without disabilities:

1. We are all created in the image of God. This means we are blessed with creativity, within boundaries, and the ability to be in relationship with one another.
2. Knowing that we are created in the image of God, seek to learn *everyone's* creative abilities and limitations. Use these abilities to complement one another within the congregation.
3. Explore what the child can do by listening, watching, touching, interacting, playing games and participating in rituals in the broader context of the congregation.
4. Invite all the members of the congregation who interact with the child and family to join in this exploration. As a member of a congregation, this child is now part of an *extensive family relationship* that includes all others in the congregation's life.

5. Places of worship need to maintain the position that children with disabilities should be included with other children of their age and grade, similar to public school classrooms.
6. Regardless of disability, many children will develop and sustain their character by engaging in relationships with other typical children their age.
7. There is no doubt that there will be an increase in the production of noise, more of a mess, and stunning silence when including children with disabilities in Sunday school and worship. This is as it should be. Again, children with disabilities are created in the image of God, the *author* of noise, mess and silence.
8. *Best buddies*, computers and extra helpers are all great additions to a religious education classroom, youth activities and even worship. Communication boards, computers and other assistive methods of communications should be allowed in both small groups and worship services so that *all* may participate.
9. Try different ways of communicating important religious concepts. Most religious education curriculum focuses on presenting material through reading and writing assignments. Instead, consider music, drama, art, mime, oral interpretation and dance.

Religious Education: Youth

Discussions of disability issues can also take place at a high school youth group meeting. Again, the Council's "Power of Words" brochure is a good resource. High school youth groups might also want to:

1. Recruit youth group members with disabilities.
2. Conduct a fund-raising campaign for accessibility improvements in the place of worship.
3. Plan an activity, such as going to the movies or baking cookies, with a group of high-school-aged people with disabilities. The emphasis should be on spending time with or working together with, *not for*, people with disabilities.
4. Watch and discuss a movie or video about people with disabilities, such as "My Left Foot," "Rainman" or "Children of a Lesser God."

Religious Education: Adult

Invite a speaker who has a disability or who works with people with disabilities to talk with the congregation. You might not have to search outside of the congregation to find a

speaker or panel of speakers. Check to see if there are people in your congregation who have friends or family members with disabilities. There might even be someone in the congregation who has a disability and would be willing to share his or her experiences.

If you need to search for a speaker, many of the organizations that work with people with disabilities, parent organizations or advocacy groups are good resources for knowledgeable speakers. Contact a local organization and let them know your congregation is interested in a speaker. Tell the group what your congregation is interested in learning, and the group should be able to match an appropriate speaker from its organization. Ask if there will be any fee involved for the speaker. If these groups aren't available in your local community, try state agencies or organizations to find the nearest chapter that can provide a speaker. There might be people with disabilities in your community who would agree to speak at your place of worship. People with disabilities usually have the greatest impact when speaking about disabilities. If the speaker has a disability, make sure the meeting place is accessible to him or her.

Adult awareness about people with disabilities is very important. The place of worship is a source of support and fellowship as well as worship. Members of the congregation, therefore, need to be sensitive to people with disabilities. The right attitude toward people with disabilities and acceptance of them will help a congregation welcome a new member who has a disability.

Worship Service

Devote one worship service in March to Disability Awareness Month. In the Christian tradition, for example, Luke 14:12-23 deals with inclusion and relates well to Disability Awareness Month. Religious education classes could become involved by sharing their presentations on how to interact with people with disabilities. You might consider singing songs about diversity and inclusion and arranging for someone to interpret the worship service in sign language.

Accessibility

Is your place of worship accessible to people with disabilities? It is crucial that all people be able to worship and participate comfortably. In fact, you might want to conduct an accessibility audit. Look at the worship service bulletins. Can copies be printed in larger type for people with visual impairments? Can audio speakers be available to people with hearing

impairments? Can the sermon be signed for members who are deaf? Physical access is important, too. Please refer to the enclosed 14-page accessibility checklist to rate the accessibility of your place of worship.

The United Methodist Church provides a 20-page booklet, "Accessibility audit for churches." See the resource section in this packet for more information.

Accessible Congregations Campaign

The National Organization on Disability's Accessible Congregations Campaign (ACC) asks congregations to commit to including people with disabilities in congregation activities. The ACC theme, "Access: It Begins in the Heart," encompasses the goal to open hearts, minds and doors to people with disabilities. By acknowledging that the place of worship has barriers that inhibit full participation of people with disabilities, the congregation can begin making changes.

Joining the ACC costs nothing. A congregation's only obligation is to use the gifts and talents of people with disabilities in all areas of service, including worship, study and leadership. As a member of the ACC, congregations receive a free brochure, information packet and commitment certificate.

Congregations throughout Indiana are encouraged to receive accessible certification. To become a member, contact Lorraine Thal at (202) 293-5960 (voice).

Working with Community Congregations

Ask your church leadership or a community organization you belong to consider meeting with religious leaders in your area to work together on community issues as well as improving access and attitudes in the entire religious community.

The National Organization on Disability's Religion and Disability Program has conducted "That All May Worship" Conferences throughout the United States since 1993. These conferences bring together people with disabilities and religious leadership to plan improved access - both physical and spiritual - in houses of worship in their community. Conference sites have been as diverse as churches, synagogues, community colleges, rehabilitation hospitals, senior citizens' centers and seminaries. The conferences have ranged in size from 25 to 600 and have informed and motivated a wide variety of participants, with and without disabilities.

Should your congregation, seminary, organization or community wish to sponsor a conference, please contact Ginny Thornburgh via e-mail at ThornburghG@nod.org, or Lorraine Thal at N.O.D. by phone at (202) 293-5960 or via e-mail at ThalL@nod.org. For more information on how to organize a "That All May Worship" conference, check out NOD's Interfaith Guides, "That All May Worship" and "From Barriers to Bridges" (see Resources).

The Religious Community and Accessibility

The ADA was designed to ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in all aspects of the community. This goal is consistent with the teachings of the world's major religions. Although religious organizations and the entities they control are exempt from some areas of the law, they are governed by the moral mandates of love and justice, which state's that places of worship should welcome everyone. The following questions, adapted from the National Organization on Disability's *Loving Justice: The ADA and the Religious Community*, address some specific requirements of the law as they relate to the religious community.

Q: Are all employees of religious organizations covered by the employment provisions of the ADA?

A. Generally, with the exception of those involved in the religious ministry, such as ministers, priests or rabbis, all employees of a religious organization with 15 or more employees are covered by Title I of the ADA.

Q: Are individual congregations required by the ADA to make their buildings accessible?

A: No. Individual congregations are considered religious organizations and are not subject to the accessibility requirements of Title III. Note: In Indiana all new construction and alterations are required to conform to Indiana's building code, whose access standards are based on federal ADA Access Guidelines.

Q: Does the ADA public accommodations section apply to a religious college that receives no direct state or federal funding, but has one or more students with federally sponsored guaranteed loans or grants?

A: If the religious college is itself a religious organization or an entity controlled by a religious organization, Title III of the ADA would not apply. However, student use of federal guaranteed loans or grants at the college will obligate the college to comply with the accessibility and nondiscrimination requirements of section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Theological Principles

Beginning in 1958 and as recently as 1995, the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC) has affirmed its belief in the dignity and worth of all people. The NCCC has reaffirmed and broadened its commitment to people with disabilities based upon the following four theological statements:

1. All people are created in the image of God: *“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image ...’”* (Genesis 1:26).
2. All people are called by God: *“For we are what (God) has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life”* (Ephesians 2:10).
3. All people have special gifts: *“Now there are varieties of gifts but the same spirit ...”* (1 Corinthians 12:4).
4. All people are invited to participate in God’s ministry: *“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”* (1 Corinthians 12:7).

Community Involvement

Plan to become involved with people with disabilities in your community and begin establishing growing relationships with them. One suggestion is to set up a telephone hotline, offering assistance to people with disabilities in your congregation’s neighborhood. For example, people with disabilities sometimes need assistance with transportation or such activities as moving into a new apartment.

Set up a fund-raising event to help make your place of worship more accessible or to assist parents of a child with a disability or a person with a disability who needs expensive medical care or home modifications.

If your place of worship is accessible to people with disabilities, offer the space for weekly advocacy group meetings.

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DISABILITY RESOURCES

Internet

NOD's Religious and Disability Program include the *Accessible Congregations Campaign* and *That All May Worship Conferences*. These programs are interfaith effort, urging faith groups, to identify and remove barriers of architecture, communications, and attitudes. For more information, visit the NOD Web site at www.nod.org.

Books

Accessibility Audit for Churches, 2nd ed. (1995). Reeves, Kathy (ed.). Helps people to discover accessibility barriers in churches. Health and Welfare Ministries Program Department, General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church. Available from the Service Center, 7820 Reading Road, Call No. 1800, Cincinnati OH 45222; 1-800-305-9857.

And Show Steadfast Love: A Theological Look at Grace, Hospitality, Disabilities and the Church (1993). Merrick, Lewis. Presbyterian Publishing House, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville KY 40202.

Creating the caring congregation. (and) *Your own congregation, your own commitment.* Wilke, H. Founder and director of the Healing Community, Wilke explores the specific needs of people with disabilities and how the church can – and must – show love and concern. To order, please write to Harold Wilke, 521 Harrison, Claremont, CA 91711.

Dancing With Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God's Children (1996). Webb-Mitchell, Brett. United Church Press/Pilgrim Press, 700 Prospect Ave. East, Cleveland Ohio 44115; 1-800-537-3394. Available also from Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com>).

A Drama of Love: An Educator's Guide to Creating Classes Where Everyone Belongs. Produced jointly by the church of the Brethren & the Mennonite Churches in the USA (1992). Mullet, Judy H., & Snyder, Paula. Mennonite Central Committee. Now distributed by Mennonite Mutual Aid: Advocacy & Educational Resource Department, P.O. Box 483, Goshen IN 46527.

From barriers to bridges. Published by the National Organization on Disability as a companion to *That all may worship* and *Loving justice*, the nondenominational guide suggests how to increase acceptance and participation of people with disabilities in their local religious communities. To order, visit www.nod.org.

Jewish education materials. Offered by YACHAD: the National Jewish Council for the Disabled, a division of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, which works to integrate youth with developmental disabilities into NCSY chapters. Materials include guidelines, a bi-monthly magazine for participants and sensitivity programs. To order, write to YACHAD, 333 Seventh Ave., New York, NY 10001, or call (212) 563-4000 ext. 268 (voice).

Jewish special individuals: Their God and their world. Published by United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Commission on Jewish Education. To order, write to United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Commission on Jewish Education, 155 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010-6802, or call (212) 533-7800 (voice).

Loving justice: The ADA and the religious community. Published by the National Organization on Disability as a companion to *That all may worship*, the 36-page resource guide describes how portions of the ADA apply to religious institutions. Single copies are \$10 each, with discounts for bulk orders. To order, visit www.nod.org.

My confirmation book I & II. Meyer, Catherine. Published by Bethesda Lutheran Homes and Services, this is a 300-page collection of lessons, drawings and activities developed by a religious education teacher who has worked with people with developmental disabilities for more than 30 years. Single copies are \$15 each. To order, call (800) 369-4636 ext. 418 (voice) or send a check or money order to Bethesda, c/o Confirmation Book, 700 Hoffman Dr., Watertown, WI 53094.

Opening Doors of Welcome and Justice to Parishioners with Disabilities A Parish Resource Guide. Create welcoming and accessible parishes using the information and suggestions in this resource from the experts at the National Catholic Partnership on Disability. Single copies are \$5.95. To order call, (800) 235-8722

Strength for His people: A ministry for families of the mentally ill. Written by the brother of a man with schizophrenia, this book is an application of the Bible to specific questions and needs among Christian families of people with mental illness. Free copies are provided by the Westcliff Baptist Church, P.O. Box 1521, Amarillo, TX 79105. Or call (806) 359-6362 (voice).

That all may worship. Davie, A. R. and Thornburgh, G. Published by the National Organization on Disability, this interfaith handbook discusses how to provide accessible worship and remove attitudinal barriers. Single copies are \$10 each, with discounts for bulk orders. To order, visit www.nod.org.

The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy program to improve religious education for children and adults with mental retardation. Written for the student with mild to moderate mental retardation, this manual has 260 lesson plans and prayer services, a parent handbook, resources and much more that is appropriate for use in inclusive classrooms, specialized classrooms or at home. Single copies are \$35 plus \$5 for shipping and handling. Order from the Department for Persons with Disabilities, 48 S. 14th St., Pittsburgh, PA 15203.

Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet: Welcoming People With Disabilities Into the Church (1994). Webb- Mitchell, Brett. Crossroad Publishing Company, 481 Eighth Ave Suite 1550, NY, NY 10001; 1-212-868-1801. Available also from Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com>).

Music

Hymn: "Sing to Our God, A Song of Cheer," by Jane Parker Huber in *A singing faith*, Westminster Press.

Videos

Eugene. This is the story of Eugene Chernyakhovsky, a young man with quadriplegia and no speech who used a trilingual computer to fulfill the requirements of becoming a Bar Mitzvah. The video and discussion guide are \$64. To order, write to Dr. Sharon Schanzer, Coordinator for Special Needs, Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education, 7607 Old York Road, Melrose Park, PA 19027. For more information, call Dr. Schanzer at (215) 635-8940.

Scripture Based Inclusion, videocassette (1993). Nuzzi, Ronald. Center for Ministry with Disabled People, University of Dayton, Dayton OH 45469.

Surprising Grace: People, Disabilities and Churches. This fifteen-minute videotape presents interviews with persons who have a variety of disabilities and discusses the gifts they contribute to their churches. For a copy contact the Presbyterian Distribution Center, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396, (800) 524-2612

Step by Step. A 10-minute video developed to encourage congregations to reach out to all people who are not participating in the congregation of their choice. Includes leader study guide and participant sheets. For a copy, call (800) 443-4899 (voice) or write to the Martin Luther Home Resource Center, 650 J St., Suite 305, Lincoln, NE 68506.

Organizations

Anabaptist Disabilities Network (Goshen IN)
www.adnetonline.org
adnet@adnetonline.org
(877) 214-9838

Christian Council on Persons with Disabilities
www.ccpd.org
(407) 210-3917
ccpd@ccpd.org

Consortium of Special Educators in Central Agencies for Jewish Education: Jewish Education Service of North America (JESNA)
www.jesna.org (Click on Networks0
(212) 284-6950

Council for Jews with Special Needs
www.cjsn.org
(480) 629-5343
info@cjsn.org

Episcopal Disability Ministries
<http://www.disability99.org/>
(888) 738-3636
disability99@earthlink.net

Lutheran Disability Ministries

www.ldminc.org

(317) 876-7099

info@ldminc.org

National Catholic Partnership on Disability

www.ncpd.org

(202) 529-2933

ncpd@ncpd.org

National Jewish Council for Disabilities

www.njcd.org

(212) 613-8235

levenson@ou.org.

National Organization on Disability: Religious Participation

www.nod.org/religion

(202) 293-5960

ability@nod.org

Pathways to Promise: Ministries and Mental Illness

www.pathways2promise.org

(314) 877-6405

pathways@mimh.edu

Presbyterians for Disabilities Concerns

www.pcusa.org/phewa/pdc

(888) 728-7228

ntroy@ctr.pcusa.org

Religion and Disability Division: American Association on Mental Retardation

www.aamr.org/Groups/div/RG/index.php

The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Program to Improve Catholic Religious Education
for Children and Adults with Mental Retardation

www.diopitt.org/dpdk.htm

(412) 456-3119

disabilities@diopitt.org

United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries

www.uccdiseabilitiesministries.org

United Methodist Church

Disabilities Concerns:

<http://new.gbqm-umc.org/umcor/work/health/disc/>

(212) 870-3871